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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/IZ
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PBTS](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [MARR](#) [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: MUALLIM SUPPORTS TRILATERAL BORDER INITIATIVE,
ASKS FOR DELAY TO HOST AUGUST 18 PM MALIKI VISIT

REF: A. DAMASCUS 574
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 426

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs Fred Hof met FM Muallim August 13 to follow up on the previous day's meetings between the Centcom-led and Syrian delegations on the trilateral border security assessment initiative (ref a).

Hof stressed our desire to include the Iraqis in the assessments and told Muallim we would be urging PM Maliki to give his approval. The assessments themselves would be technical in nature, conducted by 6-8 member military teams led by a lieutenant colonel. Muallim said he supported the initiative but preferred a trilateral approach. Since the Iraqis were now openly opposed to U.S.-Syrian-Iraqi border security cooperation, Muallim asked for more time to discuss the issue with PM Maliki during his August 18 visit to Damascus and urged the U.S. also to convince Maliki to reconsider. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Special Coordinator Hof told Muallim the previous day's meetings between the U.S. and Syrian delegations had gone positively. Washington, he said, would be pleased that Syria was willing to move forward on the trilateral border assessment initiative. The U.S. still preferred a trilateral approach and would be seeking to convince PM Maliki that such an initiative would promote everyone's interests. He asked for Muallim's approval to tell Maliki prior to his trip to Damascus that:

-- the Syrian side posed no objection to the proposed dates or locations of the assessments and was ready to proceed with beginning of logistical preparations. Indeed, Muallim authorized the U.S. to tell the Iraqi side that Syria was prepared to begin on August 18-19 at Yarubiyeh-Rabiyaha, with the understanding that a delay of a "few days" might be needed to accommodate August 18 Syrian-Iraqi discussions in Damascus.

-- if Maliki still opposed Iraqi participation, we would urge him to consent to a U.S.-Syrian bilateral assessment on the Syrian side of the border. Because there were U.S.-Syrian bilateral issues that hinged on the successful outcome of the border security assessments, we wanted to move forward as soon as possible, preferably with a trilateral format, but bilaterally if Iraq would not agree to the

trilateral proposal.

-- there did not appear from our vantage to be a need to have another pre-assessment meeting that included the Iraqis. If the Iraqis agreed to participate, it would be possible to bring them up to operational speed quickly. If they continued to resist the concept, then Syria and the U.S. would both try to persuade PM Maliki to assent to their decision to move forward on a bilateral basis.

13. (C) Muallim replied he had no problem with this message to Maliki. He agreed the trilateral approach was preferable and said Syria would present this position during PM Maliki's August 18 visit to Damascus. Muallim noted he and Secretary Clinton had discussed undertaking a trilateral initiative in May; this had also been the term of reference for Senator Mitchell's most recent discussions with President Asad. PM Maliki had voiced objection to Iraq's participation in this undertaking since the very beginning; now Iraq was opposed to a bilateral U.S.-Syrian joint border assessment.

14. (C) Muallim urged the U.S. to try to convince PM Maliki that the trilateral initiative served everyone's mutual interests and to participate. Syria wanted to move forward, but in the interest of not offending the Iraqis, it would be better to wait "a few days" beyond the proposed August 18-19 assessment until the SARG had a chance to try persuade PM Maliki on the merits of trilateral cooperation. Hof agreed this approach made sense, but reiterated our case would be more persuasive if we could tell PM Maliki that Syria was agreeable to the proposed dates. Muallim agreed, reemphasizing the seriousness of Syria's desire to move

forward with the U.S., and hopefully with Iraq, in implementing this initiative.

15. (C) Hof took pains to reiterate to Muallim the technical nature of the undertaking. The U.S. side would consist of military specialists with expertise in personnel, training, and equipment matters relevant to border security; the team would be headed by a lieutenant colonel (muqaddam). Muallim acknowledged this point and responded positively to Hof's observation that the American specialists might learn something from their Syrian counterparts. Muallim emphasized that, if the trilateral approach is accepted by Iraq, the assessment should cover the Iraqi border posts as well as those on the Syrian side.

16. (C) Comment: President Asad has been personally working to persuade PM Maliki to visit Damascus to address mutual frustrations that have prevented bilateral Syrian-Iraqi relations from progressing. Publicly sensitive to the rise of attacks on Shia in Iraq and aware of Baghdad's open opposition to Washington's proposed trilateral initiative, Muallim's emphasis on finding a way to reassure PM Maliki makes good sense. At the same time, FM Muallim, who openly opposed the idea of a trilateral border assessment in May because of doubts about U.S. intentions, now is enthusiastic about undertaking the initiative as a means of building confidence with Washington. Going forward with the trilateral initiative makes sense only if Baghdad is willing to participate. Also acceptable (though less desirable) would be a green light from Baghdad for moving forward on a bilateral U.S.-Syrian border assessment. It is a good sign that Muallim is willing to help support our efforts by making a pitch to PM Maliki to reconsider.

HUNTER